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## **The port of Siraf: Historical Memory and Iran's role in the Persian Gulf**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper will investigate the historical role of Siraf in the Persian Gulf and its importance to Iranian history more generally. The Persian Gulf coast is often neglected in general histories of Iran, yet in the Sasanian and early Islamic period Iran's dominance of the region helped establish it as a major regional power. The memory of Siraf, the most important port on the Persian Gulf from about 800 to 1000 AD, has become an important part of Iran's cultural legacy. It also served as a model and inspiration for the wealthy and powerful ports that succeeded it, Kish and Hormuz, and the three ports together dominated the Persian Gulf for a period of seven centuries. Their prosperity was built on strong commercial relations with China and the Indian Ocean world, starting in the Sasanian period. Several issues will be addressed: why were all these cities located on the northern side of the Gulf, and what accounts for their migration southward, from Siraf to Kish and finally Hormuz?*

*What kind of political ties did they have with each other and with the dominant powers on the Iranian plateau such as the Buyids, the Mongols or their successors? What were their connections with the interior and how did the political formations in these small ports differ from that of Iranian cities on the plateau? In what ways was Siraf similar or different from ports in the Arabian sphere, such as Qalhat or Basra?*

*Why, in more modern times beginning with the Safavid period, did these ports fall into disuse, such that they were insignificant*

*by the time of the Qajars? Finally, what is the significance today for the legacy of Siraf and Iran's role as a Persian Gulf power? This paper seeks to address these issues.*

Iran's historic role in the Persian Gulf, and its rightful predominance there, has always been self-evident to Iranians. The historical memory of Persian domination of the Gulf during the Sasanian and early Islamic period, and much later during the 18th century under Nadir Shah, have formed the background to later demands that territory once under Iranian control be returned to it, including Bahrain and several well-known islands. The Gulf, indeed, forms part of Iran's cultural heritage, and in modern times any suggestion that it is not Persian has led to clashes with its Arab neighbors. Clearly, the past is important to Iranians and memory of it contributes to Iranian identity and, in modern times, Iranian nationalism.

This paper seeks to explore the attachment of Iranians to the Persian Gulf and to review the historical circumstances that led to the rise of powerful port cities there in the pre-Mongol period. For eight centuries starting around 800 AD, Siraf, Kish and Hormuz in turn became glittering emporiums on the Iranian coast, whose riches were based on seaborne trade with China and India. In each case these polities and the prosperity they created were destroyed. Their example, however, proved an



inspiration to Iranian leaders in the future, from Nader Shah to Nasir al-Din Shah to the Pahlavi monarchs and leaders of the Islamic Republic to maintain Iran's influence in the Persian Gulf.<sup>1</sup>

A number of issues arise from reviewing these little-studied and poorly documented polities. What circumstances led to the rise of these ports in the first place, and later to their demise? Why were all the important ports in the Gulf located along its northern littoral and not on the Arab side? What accounts for a migration eastward of power? How were these ports tied to their hinterlands, and in what way were they related to others on or near the Gulf? What kind of political life typified them, and how did this differ from that of better-known cities on the Iranian plateau? Finally, what accounts for their continued importance and relevance today? Why, a millennium after its collapse, are we having a conference about Siraf?

### **Gulf history and society**

Although high Persian culture, including literature and art, was largely a product of the great cities on the Iranian plateau such

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<sup>1</sup> For brief overviews of the Persian Gulf in the early Islamic period see Roger M. Savory, "A.D. 600-1800," in *The Persian Gulf States: A General Survey*, ed. Alvin J. Cottrell, et. al. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 14-20 and chapter 7 in Arnold T. Wilson, *The Persian Gulf: An Historical Sketch from the Earliest Times to the beginning of the Twentieth Century* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928; repr. 1959).

as Isfahan, Shiraz, Tabriz and Herat, *Iran-zamin* consisted of many different regions, including the Gulf coast. This region, however, had characteristics making it different from inland cities. The Gulf world was united by a maritime environment and an economy based on pearling and the long-distance dhow trade. Tribes traveled freely back and forth across the Gulf, and some had sections on both sides, most famously the Qawasim based in Sharjah and Ras al-Khaimah who temporarily governed Bandar Lengeh. Settlements along the coast often had closer relations with those on the Arab side than those in the interior, due to ease of communication. Most Gulf residents then and now were and are bilingual or multilingual. The Gulf was oriented outward, toward the Indian Ocean, rather than inward toward the Middle East, and was part of a cosmopolitan world of mixed race, religion and ethnicity<sup>1</sup>. The port cities under discussion here probably had more regular ties with trading partners in India or Africa than with cities such as Isfahan or

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<sup>1</sup> See the illuminating overview of Gulf history by M.R. Izady, "The Gulf's Ethnic Diversity: An Evolutionary History," in *Security in the Persian Gulf: Origins, Obstacles, and the Search for Consensus*, ed. Lawrence Potter and Gary Sick (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 33-90. Regarding the cosmopolitan nature of Gulf cities, the Bhackers say of Qalhat: "The society was clearly cosmopolitan, comprising wealthy Persianised-Arab Hormuzi notables and a mixed Arab merchant class, supported by communities of fishermen and cultivators. To this we can add an artisanal class of potters...." (Mohammed Redha Bhacker and Bernadette Bhacker, "Qalhat in Arabian History: Context and Chronicles," in *The Journal of Oman Studies*, vol. 13 (2004), p. 43.)



Tehran. (It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that many fine houses in Siraf were built of teak, imported from Zanzibar.<sup>1</sup>)

The history of the Persian Gulf has been regularly neglected in the work of Iranian historians and retrieving it is a daunting prospect. Most works of history written in Persian since the time of the Mongols naturally focus on politics on the plateau and are not too concerned with the southern coastline.<sup>2</sup> This includes major historians such as Rashid al-Din, Khwandamir, and Hafiz Abru. The fact that Iran was governed by dynasties of Turkish origin for a millennium starting around 1000 AD naturally oriented their interests to the north, not the south. Two key works on the history of Siraf and Kish are now lost, although

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<sup>1</sup> Ya'qub b. 'Abd-Allah al-Hamawi Yaqut, *Mu'jam al-buldan*. Section on Persia translated by Casimir Barbier de Meynard as *Dictionnaire Géographique, Historique et Littéraire de la Perse et des Contrées Adjacentes* (Paris, 1861; reprint Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1970), p. 332. This is typical of the situation for other Gulf cities. With no wood to be had in the Gulf, mangrove poles were commonly imported from East Africa for building purposes and wood for shipbuilding often came from India. (See Alan Villiers, "Some Aspects of the Arab Dhow Trade", in *The Middle East Journal* 2 (1948): 399, 414-15.)

<sup>2</sup> A similar problem has plagued historians of Oman. According to the Bhackers, "...the main aim of the Omani chronicler in centuries past was to chart the life and times of the ruling dynasties and Imams of interior Oman. The cosmopolitan, outward-looking world of the merchants, ship owners and *nakhodas* (ships' captains) who inhabited Qalhat was entirely peripheral to the concerns of the chronicler." See "Qalhat in Arabian History," 14.

some of the information they contain has been transmitted by others.<sup>1</sup>

The medieval Islamic geographers, who wrote from the 9th to the 11th centuries AD, do provide valuable information about the Gulf ports.<sup>2</sup> All scholars aiming to learn about Siraf, Kish and Hormuz must start with the brief descriptions left by writers such as Masudi (943), Istakhri (951), Ibn Hawqal (978) and Muqaddasi (985). All of them, we note, were writing when Siraf was at the height of its splendor. By the time of the visit by Yaqut in the early 1200s, Siraf had fallen on hard times and the geographer found it hard to believe that it had once been a glorious city.<sup>3</sup> Following him, there are brief descriptions by

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<sup>1</sup> For Kish, *Tarikh-i muluk-i Bani Qaysar* (see Jean Aubin, "La ruine de Siraf et les routes du Golfe Persique aux XI et XII siècles," in *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale X-XII Siècles* (Université de Poitiers), Tome II (1959), p. 298); for Hormuz, a *Shahnameh* written by the prince Turanshah after 1350, some of which was translated into Portuguese.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald Blake, Heather Bleaney, David Imrie and Richard Lawless, "Geographers of the Persian Gulf," in Cottrell, *The Persian Gulf States*, pp. 101-20. See also W. Barthold, *An Historical Geography of Iran*, trans. Svat Soucek (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 142-47 & 160-61 and G. Le Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate: Mesopotamia, Persia, and Central Asia from the Moslem conquest to the time of Timur* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1905; repr. Lahore: Al-Biruni, 1977), pp. 232-47.

<sup>3</sup> Yaqut, *Mu'jam al-buldan*, pp. 331-33.



Mustawfi (1340)<sup>1</sup> and Ibn Battuta<sup>2</sup>, who visited the Gulf in 1331-32 and again 15 years later. Then there is a long silence. By late Qajar times the small port of Bandar Tahiri is mentioned, with nearby Siraf standing in ruins.<sup>3</sup>

### The rise of Siraf: historical framework

The rise and fall of Siraf, like other port cities, was linked to the political situation in the larger Islamic world.<sup>4</sup> The Muslim conquest of Sind in 711 enlarged the *dar al-Islam* and led to greatly expanded trade with the Islamic heartland. The rise of the Abbasids after 750 AD and their establishment of a capital at Baghdad led to a “Golden Age” that reached its apogee under

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<sup>1</sup> Hamd-Allah Mostowfi, *The Geographical Part of the Nuzhat-al-Qulub composed by Hamd-Allah Mustawfi of Qazwin in 740 (1340)*, trans. G. Le Strange. E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Series, 23 (Leyden: E.J. Brill and London: Luzac & Co., 1919), p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> Ibn Battuta, Muhammad b. ‘Abd-Allah, *Rihla*, trans. H.A.R. Gibb as *The Travels of Ibn Battuta, A.D. 1325-1354*. 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the Hakluyt Society, 1958-71).

<sup>3</sup> J.G. Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf, Oman and Central Arabia*, Volume II (Calcutta, 1908; reprint Farnham Common, England: Archive Editions, 1986), in vol. 9, pp. 1853-54; George N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question* (London: Frank Cass & Co., 1892; reprint 1966), vol. 2, p. 406.

<sup>4</sup> For an overview of the general situation, see André Wink, *Al-Hind: The Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, vol. 1, *Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam, 7th-11th Centuries* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 53-59 and vol. 2, *The Slave Kings and the Islamic Conquest 11th-13th Centuries* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 17-19.



Harun al-Rashid (ruled 786–809). Strong consumer demand in Baghdad and other cities for luxuries of the East meant a reinvigorated seaborne commerce between the Gulf and the Indian Ocean world.<sup>1</sup>

The basis of prosperity for Siraf and the other major ports was this trade. Voyages from the Gulf to China took about six months. Ships would depart in September or October on the northeast monsoon, and return to the Gulf on the southwest monsoon in April.<sup>2</sup> This connection is illustrated by the large quantities of Chinese ceramics found at Siraf in the excavations of the 1960s and 1970s. According to Whitehouse, Chinese wares made a sudden appearance in the Gulf around the year 800, and trade thrived during the 9th century.<sup>3</sup>

At this time, Siraf was the principal city on the Iranian coast, while on the Arabian side Suhar, Julfar and Muscat were key links in the network of port cities. At the head of the Gulf were Ubullā, the main port of the Sasanids, where larger ships

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<sup>1</sup> See George F. Hourani, *Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Medieval Times*, revised and expanded by John Carswell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 61-82.

<sup>2</sup> Savory in Cottrell, *The Persian Gulf States*, 17.

<sup>3</sup> David Whitehouse and Andrew Williamson, "Sasanian Maritime Trade," in *Iran* 11 (1973), esp. pp. 48-49.



docked, and nearby Basra, founded in 638 AD. Because of hazards in navigating in this area, however, many ships in the China trade preferred to visit Siraf and offload their cargoes to smaller ships for the trip up the Gulf. Ships were often wrecked on the sandbars near Abadan,<sup>1</sup> while the Shatt al-Arab, filled with wrecks and with dangerous currents, “was one of the most dangerous waterways in Asia.”<sup>2</sup>

Adverse developments in Iraq after the mid-ninth century led to Siraf becoming the leading emporium in the Gulf.<sup>3</sup> The slave revolts of the Zanj in southern Iraq in 868-83 led to widespread destruction. Basra was largely destroyed in 871 and was sacked again by the Carmathians in 923. Under the period of Buyid rule (932-1044), trade through the Gulf increased, especially when the empire was at its zenith under ‘Adud al-Daula (r. 949-83).<sup>4</sup> In 966 he temporarily imposed Buyid rule on Oman; an expedition in 970-72 captured Suhar and the following year conquered the mountainous interior.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hourani, 69-70.

<sup>2</sup> R. J. Barendse, *The Arabian Seas: The Indian Ocean World of the Seventeenth Century* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), p. 40.

<sup>3</sup> Savory in Cottrell, *The Persian Gulf States*, 17.

<sup>4</sup> Wink, *Al-Hind*, vol. 1, 55.

## **Decline of Siraf**

By the 11th century, however, the international political situation had changed and the trade of the Gulf was in serious decline. In the west, the Fatimid conquest of Egypt in 969 led the authorities to promote the Red Sea route and consequently the rise of Jidda.<sup>1</sup> In the east, the trade with China had already started to decline following a major revolt against the ruling T'ang dynasty in 878 and the looting of Canton and massacre of many foreign merchants there.<sup>2</sup>

The arrival of the Saljuq Turks and their entry into Baghdad in 1055 led to a new and powerful Sunni dynasty on the plateau, and the beginning of a process of large-scale migration of Turkic tribesmen into Iran. Like other major Iranian dynasties, the Saljuqs were focused on the north. Revolts by the Shabankara tribe in Fars led to economic decline there and in ports like Siraf which were dependent upon it. A local Saljuq dynasty was established in Kirman in 1048 under Qawurd (the son of Chagri Beg), which lasted for a century and a half. He launched raids on the Omani coast, overthrowing the Buyid

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<sup>5</sup> Ch. Bürgel and R. Mottahedeh, "'Azod-al-Dawla," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* 3, p. 266.

<sup>1</sup> This favoring of the Red Sea route lasted for three centuries under the Fatimids (969-1171) and Ayyubids (1171-1250).

<sup>2</sup> Savory in Cottrell, *The Persian Gulf States*, pp. 15-18.



governors still in place, and the Saljuqs occupied Oman until 1167.<sup>1</sup> This led to the introduction of a new Turkic element in the Gulf, the enhancement of the north-south trade route,<sup>2</sup> and a political link between Kirman and Qalhat.

A number of developments led to the decline of Siraf around the year 1000. The best known is the major earthquake lasting seven days which ravaged the city in 977 and ruined its harbor. But there were other long-term factors. Under the aegis of the Saljuqs in Kirman, the trade of the Gulf was diverted from Siraf to its rival, Kish.<sup>3</sup> As Aubin notes, the amirs of Kish had a bad reputation as the corsairs of the Gulf, and an upsurge of piracy was able to block trade coming up the Gulf to Siraf. Apparently the final ruin of Siraf was caused by Kish's ruler, Rukn al-Din Khumartagin.<sup>4</sup>

Siraf was in decline at the time of the writing of the *Fars-nameh* around 1100.<sup>5</sup> Aubin dates the final emigration of people from

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<sup>1</sup> Bhacker, 30

<sup>2</sup> Wink, *Al-Hind*, 19.

<sup>3</sup> Wink, 58

<sup>4</sup> According to the *Farsnameh*. In Le Strange, 258.

<sup>5</sup> C. Edmund Bosworth, "Ebn al-Balki," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* 8, p. 4.

Siraf to Kish around 1110, at which point the inland town of Fal succeeded Siraf as the capital of the district.<sup>1</sup> Kish became the major emporium on the Gulf until the rise of Hormuz in the early 13th century.

### **The rise and fall of port cities**

One striking fact about port cities in the Gulf is that many have had only a temporary period of fluorescence. Indeed, it seems like Iranian ports have arisen and fallen as often as have capital cities on the plateau. Each city had its moment of glory: for Siraf, it was around 850-1000 AD; for Kish, 1000-1200; and for Hormuz, from 1300 until 1600. Bushire became the major Iranian port from the 1730s to the 1920s, then Khorramshahr until 1980, and Bandar Abbas since that time.<sup>2</sup> In each case the replacement of a port was due to its destruction, either because of the harbor silting up, earthquake, or war. The alteration of ports was also evident on the Arab side of the Gulf. For example, towns that had been important in the early 19th century such as Ras al-Khaimah and Sharjah were later eclipsed

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<sup>1</sup> Jean Aubin, "La Survie de Shilau et la Route du Khunj-o-Fal," in *Iran* 7 (1969), p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> X. de Planhol, "Bandar-e 'Abbas," in *Encyclopædia Iranica* 3 (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1989), pp. 685-87; X. de Planhol, "Bushehr," *Encyclopædia Iranica* 4 (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1990), pp. 569-72.



by Dubai and Abu Dhabi.<sup>1</sup> What is the reason for this alteration? There are geological, hydrological and political factors at play.

In terms of geography, all the important port cities were located on the northern shore of the Gulf because the water was deeper there and it was therefore easier to navigate.<sup>2</sup> (For the same reason, it was not so good for pearling.) The fact that the Iranian coastline always had a settled population, with the possibility to supply ships with food and water, as well as offer a route to inland trading centers such as Shiraz, always made the presence of cities there more likely than on the southern shore.

This is not to say the Iranian harbors were good; in fact, the opposite was the case. Yaqut, who visited Siraf after the earthquake, mentions that it did not have a harbor, and that ships had to proceed 2 farsakhs to Nabad [Naband] for an anchorage sheltered from the wind.<sup>3</sup> Kish and Hormuz are, of course, islands that may have offered better anchorages. Kish is located 11 miles off the mainland and has deep water just outside the

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Peter Lienhardt, *Shaikhdoms of Eastern Arabia* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> Kimbriel Mitchell et al., "Appendix A: The Persian Gulf," in Cottrell, *The Persian Gulf States*, p. 541.

<sup>3</sup> Yaqut, *Mu'jam al-buldan*, p. 332. One farsakh/farsang equals about 6 kilometers.

reef surrounding it.<sup>1</sup> Hormuz is four miles off the mainland (and 11 miles from Bandar Abbas).

In modern times, ships stopping on the Iranian coast commonly have had to anchor far offshore and transfer goods by lighter. Thus at Bushire an inner anchorage was located 3 miles from shore with minimum depths of 18 feet, and an outer anchorage 7 miles off shore with minimum depths of 36 feet.<sup>2</sup> At Bandar Abbas the anchorage was 3 miles offshore.<sup>3</sup> At Taheri, however, there was an anchorage with 48 feet of water only one half a mile offshore.<sup>4</sup>

### **Ecology and hinterland**

In considering the Iranian emporia in the Gulf, the great conundrum is how such poor sites could support great and prosperous cities. Obviously, these towns were not self supporting in food and water; Hormuz, the greatest of them,

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<sup>1</sup> Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, "Qais," pp. 1471-74; "Hormuz Island," pp. 747—50.

<sup>2</sup> [British] Naval Intelligence Division, *Persia*, Geographical Handbook Series (n.p., 1945), p. 502.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 500.

<sup>4</sup> Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, p. 1853.



with an estimated population of 50,000,<sup>1</sup> was completely barren. It is hard to believe that Siraf was once the leading port in the Gulf, eclipsing Basra and, according to Istakhri, being almost as large as Shiraz. Muqaddasi says that the houses in Siraf were the finest he had ever seen, and Istakhri remarks that Sirafi merchants were the richest in Fars.<sup>2</sup> In the late 10th century Siraf was full of merchants and was referred to as “the emporium of Fars.”<sup>3</sup>

It is clear that the prosperity of the city was built completely on commerce, as physical conditions there were difficult in the extreme. The town was located on a narrow coastal plain, a long distance (60 farsakhs) from the nearest major city on the plateau, Shiraz. Siraf was the hottest town in the country, according to Istakhri and, according to Ibn Hawqal, had no trees<sup>4</sup>. It had extremely poor soil and received less than 300 mm of rainfall annually. Whitehouse estimates that about 700 hectares near

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<sup>1</sup> According to Aubin.

<sup>2</sup> Istakhri in Le Strange, 258; Muqaddasi in Wilson, 94.

<sup>3</sup> *Hudud al-'Alam: 'The Regions of the World'. A Persian Geography 372 A.H.-982 A.D.*, 2nd ed., trans. V. Minorsky. E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Series, New Series, 11 (London: Luzac, 1970), p.127.

<sup>4</sup> Citation of Istakhri and Ibn Hawkel in Wilson, 94



Siraf were cultivated, with at least 72% of the land irrigated.<sup>1</sup> The key to provisioning Siraf were the rich valleys of Jam and Galehdar behind the city.

### **Migration of ports and people**

One of the intriguing issues regarding the medieval Iranian emporiums on the Iranian coast was their migration eastward in the Gulf over the centuries: from Rishahr/Bushehr, to Siraf, to Kish, and finally to Hormuz. Why did this happen? The reasons appear to be both economic and ecological. In the first place, the *raison d'être* for cities such as Siraf was international trade. But trade and people could and did move to other locations depending on changing conditions, such as the shift in trade routes from Shiraz to Kerman. The fall of Siraf could be compensated by the rise of another port which could just as easily serve as a terminus for trade from the East. Persian was widely spoken throughout the Gulf, including Sohar.<sup>2</sup> Aubin found that after the fall of Siraf many Sirafis migrated to the inland town of Fal, to the Omani town of Sohar, to the island of Kish and undoubtedly Hormuz.<sup>3</sup> After the fall of Siraf, Kish and

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<sup>1</sup> David Whitehouse, "Excavations at Siraf: Sixth Interim Report," in *Iran* 12 (1974), pp. 2, 5.

<sup>2</sup> According to Masudi. In Cottrell, 16



Hormuz became rivals for the trade with India, with Hormuz prevailing after the 1330s.<sup>1</sup>

As mentioned earlier, there was an ease of circulation in the Gulf such that people or tribes on one side could move freely to the other. There were many Arabs on the Iranian side (especially in the 18th and 19th centuries) as well as Persians on the Arab side. In some cases towns may have exhausted their ecological base. Bad times could lead to large-scale population movement. This happened notably in 18th century Arabia, where a drought pushed tribes toward the coast and led to the establishment of ruling dynasties in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. The crash of the pearl industry in the Gulf in the 1930s led many to emigrate. Likewise, people dissatisfied with their ruler could always migrate to another area, and they frequently did up until the 20th century.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Aubin, "La ruine de Siraf et les routes du Golfe Persique aux Xie et XIIe siècles," in *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale, Xe-XIIe Siècles*, Tome II (Poitiers), 1959, p. 297-98.

<sup>1</sup> Peter Morgan, "New Thoughts on Old Hormuz: Chinese Ceramics in the Hormuz Region in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries," in *Iran* 29 (1991), pp. 69, 70.

<sup>2</sup> "The Authority of Shaykhs in the Gulf: An Essay in Nineteenth-Century History" by Peter Lienhardt, in *Arabian Studies* 2 (1975): 72-73.

If for any reason a town was no longer viable, therefore, for environmental or political reasons, people could simply move on, and abandoned towns are certainly not unusual in Iran. The decline of Qalhat has many parallels with that of Siraf: local power struggles played a role, but the Portuguese diversion of the trade to Muscat was the final blow.<sup>1</sup> As in the case of Siraf, the town lapsed into obscurity.

### **The Gulf in Iran's historical memory**

After the establishment of the Safavid dynasty and the development of a strong national identity based on Shiite Islam and Iranian culture, interest in Iran's historic role in the Persian Gulf increased. The expulsion of the Portuguese from Hormuz in 1622 led to the development of Bandar Abbas as an important Gulf port that was named for a shah who took a personal interest in the area. In the 1740s Nadir Shah "stroved to revive the ancient Persian mastery of the sea" by establishing a navy and temporarily establishing control over Bahrain and Oman.<sup>2</sup> With a fleet of 30 ships, Nader had the most powerful Persian armada in the region until modern times.<sup>3</sup> After the collapse of the

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<sup>1</sup> Bhacker, 50

<sup>2</sup> L. Lockhart, *Nadir Shah: A Critical Study Based Mainly Upon Contemporary Sources* (London, 1938; repr. Jalandhar, India: Asian Publishers, 1993), p. 221.



Afsharid empire, a number of independent Arab principalities established themselves along the Iranian shoreline.

For a long time the Qajar monarchs, who came to power in the late 18th century, were not interested in the Gulf or able to assert themselves there, being cut off by poor communications and preoccupied with threats from the northeast and northwest. But in 1845 the Persian Prime Minister, Hajji Mirza Aghassi, claimed all the waters and islands of the Gulf as Persian.<sup>1</sup> Finally, in 1885, the Tehran government acquired a ship, the Persepolis, to patrol the Gulf.<sup>2</sup>

It was not until late in the 19th century, however, that the Tehran government was able to reassert control over its Gulf littoral, reclaiming Bandar Abbas from Oman in 1868 and in 1887 evicting the (Arab) Qasimi shaikhs who had long ruled Bander Langeh. By about 1890, the Persian government was “exercising along its shores and over its islands a more extended

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<sup>3</sup> Lockhart, *Nadir Shah*, chapter 21.

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Richard Schofield, “Anything but Black and White: A Commentary on the Lower Gulf Islands Dispute,” in *Security in the Persian Gulf*, ed. Potter and Sick, p. 184.

<sup>2</sup> Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question*, p. 394.

and emphatic authority than at almost any previous epoch during the last 300 years,” according to Lord Curzon.<sup>1</sup>

### **Siraf's later history**

Although there are numerous references to Siraf in the literature of the pre-Mongol period, after this time there is practically no mention of it in Persian literature until modern times. It was not until the city was “re-discovered” by western travelers and archaeologists that Iranians were reminded of its famous legacy. The site of Siraf was first brought to the attention of Europeans in 1835, and attracted a few visitors thereafter who remarked on its poor condition.

Probably because of its strategic location on the barren Persian coast, even though the town's glory days were over it was often the seat of local political authority. The revival of the fortunes of Shiraz in the 13th century probably were reflected in Siraf. A mosque was constructed there in the 14th or 15th century, which Aubin reckons corresponded to a revival there.<sup>2</sup> In the 19th century, Bandar Taheri was prosperous enough to have an Iranian customs post, and its ships traded with Basra, Oman, and

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 433.

<sup>2</sup> Aubin, “La Survie de Shilau”, p. 28.

other Arab Gulf ports.<sup>1</sup> In the early years of the 20th century (probably between 1912-22), a fort was built there with fine stucco decorations of figures from the *Shahnama*. This has no parallels with other forts on either side of the Gulf.<sup>2</sup> Up until the mid-20th century, Tahiri continued to be the seat of authority for the Nasuri family.<sup>3</sup>

### **Siraf's future**

Today, because of its proximity to the large Kangan and Nar gas fields located just northwest of the city, and its closeness to the port of Asaluyeh to the south (which is becoming a major center of operations for exploiting gas fields in the Persian Gulf), the preservation of Siraf is of critical importance. So far, Siraf is the only Iranian port to be excavated and the discoveries there offer unique evidence of a great if vanished civilization. On the Arab side of the Gulf, in contrast, there have been extensive and continuing excavations that have clarified much of the history of

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<sup>1</sup> Lorimer, *Gazetteer of the Persian Gulf*, pp. 1853-54.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer M. Scarce, "Princes and Heroes of Bandar-i Tahiri—A Late Qajar Fort and the *Shahnama*," in *Cairo to Kabul: Afghan and Islamic Studies presented to Ralph Pinder-Wilson*, ed. Warwick Ball and Leonard Harrow (London: Melisende, 2002), pp. 181-93.

<sup>3</sup> Shahnaz Nadjmabadi, "'Arabisiert' oder 'iranisiert'? Siedlungsgeschichte in der iranischen Provinz Hormozgan am Persischen Golf," in *Welt des Islam* 45, 1 (2005), pp. 108-50.

its southern shore.<sup>1</sup> In the rush to develop petroleum resources that is so important for Iran today, it is essential that the site of Siraf be preserved, for scholars, tourists and indeed the wider Iranian public. It is a timely reminder of Iran's historic role in the Persian Gulf, and could be developed as a major tourist attraction. The history of the Persian Gulf is a story of the rise and fall of cities, and in this narrative Siraf may have another role to play.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, D.T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).